DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 437 676 CS 510 200

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TITLE How Gender Identities Affect Interactions between Professors and Students (Roles of Schoolwomen).
PUB DATE 1999-00-00
NOTE 12p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; *Sex Role; *Sex Stereotypes; *Sexual Identity; *Teacher Characteristics; Teacher Expectations of Students; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Women Faculty
IDENTIFIERS Womens History

ABSTRACT

This paper explores written reports about socially constructed female gender roles and allows examination of how dominant viewpoints continually affect the evolution of women's roles as schoolwomen, focusing on societal evaluation of women's roles. Data for the paper were collected by 5 groups of students in a Communication Theory course. The groups were assigned to develop a theory based on their descriptions and explanations about the types of interactions that occur between women and men faculty and their students. The paper concludes that a combination of typical male task-oriented instruction with typical female relational-type instruction is important to teaching ability and effectiveness. (Contains 16 references.) (EF)

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ED 437 676

How Gender Identities Affect Interactions Between Professors and Students

[Roles of Schoolwomen]

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CS 510 200

How Gender Identities Affect Interactions
Between Professors and Students

[Roles of Schoolwomen]

Gender identities are socially created as members within a social group interact with each other. For example, American parents and caretakers socialize gender into children by teaching them the types of behaviors that are appropriate for girls and boys within their social groups. As suggested by Cushner et al: "in all cultural groups, gender identity includes knowledge of a large set of rules and expectations for what boys and girls should wear, how they should speak and act, and their place in the overall structure of society" (1996, p. 200). A similar viewpoint will be apparent in the research findings reported on herein, particularly those provided by students concerning interactions between faculty members (e.g., both women and men) and students in a southeastern university. Their reports seem to "reinforce (the) deeply held and mostly unexamined beliefs about appropriate ideas, values and behaviors for girls and boys" (Cushner, et al., 1996, p. 206-207).

This essay explores written reports about how members of society have powerfully constructed acceptable gender behaviors that women have been permitted to enact since the late 1700s. The cited narratives are fascinating because they allow readers to examine how dominant standpoints continually affect the evolution of women's roles as schoolwomen. Furthermore, the depicted ideas are meant to display how most members of society have evaluated women's roles since that time period. To explain this, the types of behavior women have been permitted and/or required to perform in Western society since the late 1700s are discussed. In addition to this historical information, groups of students in a recent Communication Theory class at a southeastern university were asked to become

'theoreticians.' The groups were asked to develop theories that described and explained how the gender of their professors seemed to affect interactions with students. The epistemological data that they presented demonstrates that although there have been some positive changes concerning the types of roles women are allowed to accomplish, there are still stereotypical images about the ways women's behaviors are both guided and interpreted. For instance, although the group members seemed to believe that women and men were both acceptable as teachers, some of them reported that it is important for women faculty members to behave "motherly" towards their students. In this paper, the similarities and differences of the economic roles that belong to women are discussed in order to make evident the development of the standpoints of women and men in Western cultures since the eighteenth century.

History of Women's Economic Roles

Mary Wollstonecraft was one of the first women to publicize information concerning the rights that women were allowed (or not allowed) by Western societies. She was born in Britain in 1759 and died there in childbirth of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelly (author of Frankenstein) in 1797. As summarized by Jane Todd in her introduction to Wollstonecraft's novel, Mary: a Fiction, Wollstonecraft had stated that:

> "Women were barred from most human concerns: government, law, commerce, medicine, and scholarship, and that they were denied economic, social, and political power. She had learned that their powerlessness was justified by a belief in their inferior intellect and ratified by the domestic ideal of woman as the angel in the house" (Wollstonecraft, 1977, p. v).

In this essay, Wollstonecraft clearly paid attention to and noted that women in the late eighteenth century were only permitted to become wives and mothers. In fact, they were not permitted public jobs. Due to her perception of women's positions in the European culture, in the Vindication of the Rights of Women, she argued that in order to contend for their rights:

> "(the) argument is built on its simple principle, that if she be not prepared by education to become the companion of man, she will stop the progress of knowledge and virtue; for truth must be common to all, or it will be inefficacious with respect to its influence on general practice" (1792).

At that point, Wollstonecraft was paying close attention to the roles that women were allowed and not allowed. In essence, the dominant social group treated women as 'children': as people who were not expected to think logically about any public aspects of life.

Shortly after Wollstonecraft's publications dominant members of society began to consider that perhaps women would become capable teachers. This led to a very positive movement away from her depiction that most members of society adhered to the "domestic ideal of woman as the angel in the house." Although school teaching began to emerge as an acceptable female occupation, the enthusiasm for educating every citizen was also "tempered by the taxpayers unwillingness to finance such education" (Lerner, 1977, p. 229). Therefore, even though the dominant group of men believed it was acceptable to allow women to become teachers, they also decided to pay schoolteachers very small salaries. The dominant groups assumed that this was acceptable since teachers would not consider their school teaching jobs as careers. Instead, they would regard their employment as merely "a stop-gap on the road to their main careers as housewives and mothers" (Lerner, 1977, p. 230),.

In order to survive successfully in their social group, women were made cognizant of the types of jobs and wages they were permitted. As Kessler-Harris noted, the wages they received depended upon the customs and traditions concerning what women were assumed to be capable of doing, and also upon how much money was necessary for survival. Indeed, women's wages, between the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rested in large measure upon conceptions of what women needed to survive.

Unfortunately, these salaries were not meant to be used to support a family[1]. The assumptions were that men, not women, would be in charge of their families finances, and that the man of the family would announce what each member could and should do. In discussing the way wages affect women's life-styles, Kessler-Harris implied that more than the exploitation of women, or paternalism towards them, their wages reflected a rather severe set of injunctions about how men and women were to live: i.e., part of the function of female wages was to ensure that women remained attached to their families. The male wage, in contrast, provided incentives to individual achievement (1997, p.206)

Currently, occupational segregation that effects the types of jobs and salaries available for women and men still exist. This was illustrated by findings of the Census Bureau that stated: "though the average 1998 earnings of people 18 or older got higher with more education, men's earnings greatly outpaced women's" (Census Bureau, 1998). Thus, although many women attend colleges in America, the reported segregation seems to be additionally promoted by the way educational institutions provide girls and boys with 'acceptable' educational outcomes. As Lips commented:

> "women are disproportionately encouraged to follow the educational paths that lead to low-prestige, feminine occupations; and men are more likely to be pushed to acquire the type of training typically associated with higher salaries, and more prestigious occupations" (1991, p. 165-166).

When discussing this segregation Natalle (1996, p. 255) talks about the expectations that young men and women seem to use when constructing their life-styles. She cites gendered issues that exist in the workplace and refers to: 1) women's expectations about what kinds of jobs they are interested in; 2) the types of work they are assumed to be capable of, and; 3) the types of jobs that their society permits and requires of them. There are significant differences between women's and men's expectations for job positions and salary. Women are expected to be in technical positions in their chosen field, whereas men view

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[1] Although both of my grandparents maintained jobs in the first half of the twentieth century, occasionally Carrie Huey Cox supported their family using her schoolteacher's wages when Joseph P. Cox did not have

themselves in management positions in the first five years of employment.. The lower expectations that women are trained to believe in and to pursue may have resulted in the lack of female management role models. This is unfortunate since the existence of such positive role models would be expected to train women to seek higher job positions and salaries.

The following segment cites the notions discussed by groups of students in a Communication Theory class in the fall of 1999. The perceptions that they provided will be used to demonstrate how the current standpoints of women have maintained, to some extent, the original structures that were discussed by Mary Wollstonecraft in the late seventeen hundreds. In addition, they present the recent emergence of somewhat different behaviors that have been added to the standpoints of women faculty members.

Findings

As mentioned previously, some of the research data obtained for this account was collected by five groups of students in a Communication Theory course. The groups were assigned to develop a theory based upon their descriptions and explanations about the types of interactions that occur between women and men faculty and their students. The assignment was phrased as follows:

1. How does the gender of a professor affect the way that she or he interacts with students during class time? Is it different from the way they interact with students when they meet them in the library, the Union, or a local bar?

2. If you believe that women and men professors interact differently with their students, provide reasons that explain WHY you believe this happens.

The groups' responses to this assignment displayed subjective epistemologies (the standpoints) of students' experiences with professors of the two genders. For the most part, the descriptions provided ascertained that the teaching styles of faculty members seem to be related to their gender and the gender of their students. One group noted that certain

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a job.

types of majors were "socially" thought to be more suited to one gender or the other. As the readers will notice, the described behaviors of faculty and student interactions seem quite similar to behaviors that have already been described as occurring in Western education institutions. Indeed, information provided by scholars such as Julia Wood, demonstrates that "most recent investigations confirm the persistence of a range of behaviors that suggest male students are taken more seriously and regarded more favorably than female students" (1994, p. 218).

The data provided by the groups presents information that emphasizes both the task and relationship functions used by female and male professors. In some ways, their reports display interpretations of social life in an educational institution which are subjectively connected with the way women's' roles were constructed and frequently publicized, as cited by Wollstonecraft in the late eighteen hundreds. For example, groups described male professors as enacting a primarily task function when teaching (e.g., a man's game plan) whereas female teachers were described as combining both task and relationship functions in the classroom. The following data have been arranged using three interaction domains: 1) male faculty members; 2) female faculty members, and; 3) subject matter and different gender of professor and student.

Male Faculty Members

When specifying the behaviors of male faculty members, the groups used phrases that seemed to suggest that male faculty members behaved as if they were 'in charge' of classroom interactions. For instance, they commented that: 1) "the male instructor was very intimidating to the students and lectured straight throw the class period" (Toricals); 2) "men tend to be more rigid and strict in class," (Indifference) and; 3) "the male typically approaches teaching with a more removed attitude" (Closet Theorists). It seems that these groups have encountered male faculty who use communication skills that remove them from enacting positive interactions with students. These descriptions seemed to focus primarily on task functions accomplished by male faculty members.

Despite this similarity, a different perspective suggested that "the gender of a professor does not affect his or her interactions with students during class time. The classroom holds a professional atmosphere where teacher-student roles are clearly defined." This is a rather large difference, which suggests that the classroom itself enacts the appropriate behaviors: i.e., as if the classroom itself 'causes' faculty to behave in certain ways. It seems possible that this group was attempting to display that male and female faculty at this university were using similar communication styles during class. Although they grouped female and male faculty together in their description, they did not provide examples that illustrated their viewpoint.

Female Faculty Members

The descriptions of female faculty members was quite different. Three of the implied that women utilize their task and relationship functions simultaneously. This is obvious in the following comments: 1) "the female instructor used many anecdotes and was very friendly to the students" (Toricals); 2) "women tend to be more tender-hearted to their students" (Indifference), and; 3) "relationships between professors and students are directly influenced by gender.....it is in a women's nature to take on a maternal role when dealing with students as a professor" (Closet Theorists). It seems that female styles of interaction are observed to be beneficial. This was furthermore implied by the Indifference groups' statement that, "one of our group members usually feels more comfortable asking a female professor to help her, even though most male professors would be willing to do the same....female professors seem friendlier and more understanding."

Of course, it seems subjective to assume that "it is in a women's nature to take on a maternal role." This is particularly questionable when other researchers have suggested that this is not the case. For instance, Wood (1997) discussed Ruddick's study of maternal thinking. As a result of her study, Ruddick concluded that "the idea of "maternal instinct" is really a set of attitudes and behaviors that are fostered by women's more frequent location in domestic spheres and caregiving roles" (Wood, 1997, p. 252-253). However,

despite this suggestion, one of the Communication Theory groups stated that "it is sociable for a female professor to cut back the amount of work. After all, how many times have mothers given in to their children or husbands' wishes?"

Subject Matter and Different Gender of Professor-Student

The final issues discussed here involve how the relationship between the professor and the students seems to depend on the subject matter of the course. One group concentrated on this by talking about the assumption that some courses are currently more socially acceptable for either men or women. They indicated that "some classes are more suited to one gender or the other....many technical, engineering, and automotive courses are thought to be most appropriate for male students....many teaching and nursing classes have a much larger number of female students compared to males." In essence, these students seem to be providing descriptive evidence that indicates the occurrence of the currently re-constructed roles that both men and women are 'allowed' in Western cultures. Once again, this data reports another practice that the Western society continually exploits the maintenance of roles that are considered acceptable.

Although these students are not suggesting programs that will change the roles, their information may be used to demonstrate ways in which similar gender roles are re-constructed in Western cultures. This was furthermore suggested by the Toricals indication that "some teachers treat students differently due to the gender of the student." When talking about interactions between faculty members and students, this group mentioned that they knew of a male professor who "gave special treatment to females" in his class and a female professor who "gave most of her attention to males" in her class. The No Name Theorists pointed out how teaching certain subject matters (the task) to students of different genders affected relationships between faculty and students. Unfortunately, the results seemed negative rather than beneficial as is confirmed by the ensuing: "some male professors seem to single out or make examples of females who may be present in a

classroom dominantly populated by males.....the female students may feel pressured to perform at higher standards in order to prove themselves equal to their male counterparts ....some of the same stereotypes may exist regarding the professor when a female professor teaches a class of all male students, she may feel unreasonably pressured to teach the class perfectly in order to gain the confidence and respect of male students."

Conclusion

It seems clear that further research needs to be conducted concerning the teaching styles used by female and male faculty members. Although the theoreticians provided good data concerning their experiences with faculty members, it is important for the researcher to conduct interviews with them to discover their subjective meanings and not rely on her own interpretations. For instance, she is not certain if suggestions about the beneficial nature of female faculty (who combine the task and relationship dimensions) were related to the fact that seventy-four percent of the theoreticians were female. Despite the 'fact' that a male student in another class informed her that he preferred the few male professors who combined both task and relationship dimensions, it is too premature to accept his statement as generalizable. If further research confirms that the combination of task and relational functions are an important aspect of teaching abilities, it may be possible to mentor upcoming Teaching Assistants with skills that have been developed primarily by women.

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